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SUBJECT: TADIC SIGNS DISCRIMINATORY LAW ON RELIGION

¶1. (U) Summary: President Tadic signed a problematic Law on Religion on April 27, despite uproar from smaller religious communities and pressure from the international community to veto the bill. The law, passed hastily through Parliament without public debate, discriminates against religious groups not belonging to the "traditional" seven by, inter alia, requiring them to re-register through a tedious and invasive process. Having engaged Tadic directly on this issue, we will now work at the highest levels of the government (which sponsored the law) and parliament to try to roll back or amend the most egregious elements of this legislation. End summary.

¶2. (U) On April 20, the Serbian Parliament hurriedly pushed through a deeply flawed Law on Religion. The Law was the sixth iteration of a bill that has long been under development. Previous versions had similar problems, but it appeared the government was committed to working with religious communities and the international community to iron out major sticking points. This sixth version, though, was submitted without opportunity for comment. More troubling, key articles of the law that would "grandfather in" pre-existing religious communities, including many smaller Protestant churches, were inexplicably dropped from the text at the last minute.

¶3. Many NGOs, religious communities, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe's Venice Commission are highly critical of the law. It recognizes the "traditional" seven religious communities (the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Slovak Evangelical Church, the Christian Reformed Church, the Evangelical Christian Church, the Islamic community and the Jewish community), while all other religious groups must now re-register with the Ministry of Religion, which has the discretion to decide whether to grant approval.

¶4. (U) The registration requirements, deemed invasive by the Council of Europe, include submitting names, identity numbers and signatures of members; proof that it meets the threshold of 0.001 percent of adult citizens of Serbia (roughly 60 people); the group's statute and summary of its religious teachings, ceremonies, religious goals and basic activities; and information on sources of funding.

¶5. (U) The government's decision to rush the legislation through to passage is even more troubling. Serbia's National Assembly approved it with 120 votes for the law, four votes against and five abstentions on April 20, a day prior to the Serbian Orthodox Easter weekend. Religious groups and international organizations who had long been engaged on the issue were not informed of last-minute changes in the draft and were blind-sided by the

Parliament's passage.

¶6. (SBU) The Ambassador delivered letters expressing concerns that the law does not conform to international standards on religious tolerance and freedom to both President Tadic and PM Kostunica immediately upon learning of the last-minute changes to the bill and its rushed passage. The Ambassador also intervened directly with Tadic on April 26 and urged him not to sign the bill. Tadic was also pressed by other resident Ambassadors, the OSCE, and the Council of Europe not to sign. Tadic nevertheless signed the legislation April 27 (a local holiday), acknowledging to local press that the law had its drawbacks and did not conform to the European Convention on Human Rights, but saying he hoped all the law's defects would be eliminated through amendments.

¶7. (SBU) COMMENT: The Embassy is now pressing the Ministry of Religion, members of parliament, the President and the Prime Minister to adopt measures to blunt the more discriminatory aspects of this legislation, and we are working with like-minded missions in Belgrade to coordinate responses from the international community to passage of the law. We will continue to register our concern at the highest levels and will follow this issue closely, including through appropriate treatment in the upcoming Report on International Religious Freedom.

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